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Nature over Nurture:

The Source of Morality in *Oliver Twist*

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Honors Senior Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the nature-nurture debate in Charles Dickens' famous novel *Oliver Twist*. More specifically, this research will examine the ways in which Dickens communicates to the reader how morality is innate, inherent, and immutable, as opposed to being the product of accumulated experience. While this is by no means the first examination of this philosophical debate within the novel, past research has placed greater emphasis on the role Oliver plays in communicating this theme, oftentimes neglecting to investigate the other major characters of the novel. In this sense, this research stands apart by both building off of existing research while simultaneously branching out to include characters such as Fagin, Mr. Bumble, and especially Nancy.

Why are we the way that we are? Are the values, beliefs, and principles that we hold most precious an inextricable and immutable part of us that we have had since birth, or are they the product of the accumulated people, places and experiences that we have had in our lives? It is this very question that lies at the core of the nature-nurture debate, a philosophical inquiry which has commanded the attention of philosophers for thousands of years. This underlying debate circulating through Victorian Great Britain was not lost on Charles Dickens, who integrated his own commentary on the subject in his novel *Oliver Twist*. Through his depictions of the characters Oliver, Fagin, Mr. Bumble, and Nancy and through the events that transpire over the course of the novel, Dickens argues that human morality is an inherent part of his or her nature; one's goodness or evilness stems not from one's upbringing, but from birth.

The origins of the nature-nurture debate, at least for the western world, can be traced all the way back to Ancient Greece through the philosophers of Plato and his student Aristotle. Plato argued that experience alone could not account for the vast amounts of knowledge and abilities that humans possess, and that humans must therefore inherently possess many of these abilities and this knowledge within them from birth. Meanwhile, Aristotle made the case that development is a "process of continual integration and differentiation," that much of who we are is a direct result of what we take in and process from the world around us (Goldhaber 14). These ideas, while by no means disappearing from Europe, gained renewed interest during the Age of Enlightenment, and continued onwards into the nineteenth century. First among the works to reinvigorate the debate was John Locke's 1689 "An Essay Concerning Human

Understanding. In it, Locke provides an explanation of how he believes individuals to come by their moral beliefs and principles:

This, however strange it may seem, is that which every day's experience confirms; and will not, perhaps, appear so wonderful, if we consider the ways and steps by which it is brought about; and how really it may come to pass, that doctrines that have been derived from no better original than the superstition of a nurse, or the authority of an old woman, may, by length of time and consent of neighbors, grow up to the dignity of principles in religion or morality. For such, who are careful (as they call it) to principle children well, (and few there be who have not a set of those principles for them, which they believe in) instill into the unwary, and as yet unprejudiced, understanding (for white paper receives any characters) those doctrines they would have them retain and profess. (Locke 54)

Similar to the views of Aristotle, Locke makes the case that one's beliefs and principles are not inherent, but are accumulated by an individual through the experiences in their life. He likens a child to a piece of white paper, explaining that just as a blank sheet of paper is capable of receiving any characters printed upon it, so too is a child, yet to form any biases or prejudices, readily open in allowing the influences and experiences of the outside world to form him as they will. While he did not use the term itself, his ideas are often attributed to the Latin phrase evoking his paper metaphor 'Tabula Rasa,' meaning 'blank slate'. Not to be left out, the influence of the nature argument stemming from Plato can be seen in the writings of Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes. Descartes believed that moral beliefs and

principles are innate, with God having created them within the mind as one is born (Descartes 63). Experience thus becomes merely a potential means of discovering what is already within oneself. It is these two guiding philosophies that Dickens considers in the nineteenth century as he is beginning to write *Oliver Twist*, at a time just twenty years before Charles Darwin published his influential *Origin of Species*. Living during this era of renewed debate on the topic, Dickens contemplated this very question of where one's morality comes from. His answer, as demonstrated through the creation of *Oliver Twist*, is one which more closely aligns with Plato and Descartes. Morality, to the author, is something inherent to one's nature rather than a product of external influence and experience from the environment around oneself.

Even before the turn of the first page, Dickens subtly suggests the existence of these two conflicting sides of the debate through the title of the novel itself. Originally titled *Oliver Twist; or The Parish Boy's Progress*, the succeeding portion following the semicolon has traditionally been recognized as a subtitle adding to the greater title as a whole. Should one emphasize the semicolon and the 'or' of the title, however, the title begins to take on a completely different meaning. Instead, two mutually exclusive options become presented to the reader: *Oliver Twist* himself or the "Parish Boy's"—that is, *Oliver Twist's*—*progress* (Sawacki) Is the purity and moral incorruptibility of the young Oliver inextricably linked to his name, thereby making it an immutable part of his nature, or is his character a progression, a fluid personality which is influenced by the characters, environments, and events of his life history? The use of the word "progress" in the title presents a related but equally important question for the reader to consider. Does progress refer to Oliver's development as a character throughout the novel, or does it refer to his advancement in class from pauper to middle class?

The former suggests morality to be determined largely nurture, while the latter supposes that Oliver's inherent goodness is the means by which his station in life improves.

But even as Dickens encourages the reader to weigh these two possibilities, his personal opinion on the matter is already set. In his analysis of inheritance in *Oliver Twist* and the evolution of the title over time, Baldridge points to Dicken's 1841 preface of the novel, stating that "the story of Oliver was designed to depict 'the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last'. In other words, the story is designed to showcase the natural goodness found within Oliver, and how said goodness is able to survive and thrive untainted in spite of the morally corrosive forces at work within industrial and imperial Victorian Britain. With this in mind, his decision to remove the subtitle of the novel completely in 1846 becomes much more understandable, as the "alteration can be seen as the author's conscientious removal of a possibly misleading phrase" (Baldridge). Oliver's "progress" within the novel is his progression of circumstance, meaning his escape from the orphanage, the workhouse, and the dark underbelly of London, and his restoration to his rightful place within the middle to upper-middle class. All of this is not only possible, but assured because of who he inherently is as a person. The title was thus edited accordingly to prevent misleading readers to think otherwise, leaving only the essential clause as the answer to the question Dickens originally posed: *Oliver Twist*.

As revelatory as the title and its alterations are in demonstrating Dicken's intent with the novel, it is but a title. The characters and their interactions with one another over the course of the novel are much more explicit in promoting the idea that morality is inherent to

one's character. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this message is most clearly demonstrated through the main character of the novel, *Oliver Twist* himself. From the very first page, Mangham identifies a sort of philosophical contradiction in the way in which Dickens describes Oliver's birth (Mangham 736). In the first part of the scene in question, "Oliver and Nature fought out the point [of his life] between them," and the result was that Oliver "breathed, sneezed," and came to life (Dickens 1). The passage depicts the young orphan as pitted against "Nature" on the matter of his life, and the fact that he is victorious against it in this fight suggests a more nurture-oriented outlook. At the same time, however, Dickens also writes that he survives in an environment that is not conducive to life. The surgeon makes no effort to provide any assistance because he would only "[do] such matters by contract," and the old woman who is to help him is too drunk to be of any assistance (Dickens 1). But even if Oliver had "been surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses, and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and indubitably have been killed in no time" (Dickens 1). Dickens inverts expectations here, making the dangerous environment Oliver's salvation while making the caring, nurturing environment a deathtrap. Thus, Oliver "wins" his battle over nature, but the role of environment is equally discredited. The precarious balance that Oliver's life hangs in during this scene mirrors the balance that these two philosophical ideas hang in at the onset of the novel, and it is not until chapter two that this balance tips in the favor of nature. Oliver's mother is dead, and has no family to call his own or to raise him. Instead, he is "farmed," squeezed for all he is worth by Mrs. Mann, who pockets the allowance she is given instead of feeding the children, who beats the children, and who only bothers to clean Oliver and the others when the Board comes to visit (Dickens 16). The Victorian

institutions entrusted with the nourishing of the child into a moral and upstanding member of society—Family, Church, and State—have all, in one way or another, failed. And yet, despite the horrendous living conditions making Oliver “Thin,” “pale,” “diminutive in stature,” and “decidedly small in circumference,” “Nature or inheritance had implanted a good sturdy spirit in [his] breast” (Dickens 17). Oliver’s inability to become corrupted no matter how horrific the environment in which he is thrust is used time and time again throughout the novel as a form of passive resistance and refutation to the idea that nurture is more important than nature in the context of moral development.

This incorruptibility also makes its way into Oliver’s speech patterns. Page highlights Dickens’ tendency to dismiss realism when it comes to linguistics, favoring instead to base a character’s spoken dialect on the “dignity and moral worth of a character” (Page 100). In particular, he identifies Oliver as having what he calls “heroic speech,” which he defines as “the imposing of a standard of ‘correct’ English upon characters who enjoy a moral status in the novels in which they appear, being clearly intended to elicit a response of moral approbation from the reader” (Page 100). A prime example of this perfect mastery over Standard English is when Oliver is recaptured by Fagin. In a state of clear distress and panic at having returned to this den of evil, he yells out “Oh, pray send them back—send him back the books and money! Keep me here all my life long; but pray, pray send them back. He’ll think I stole them; the old lady, all of them who were so kind to me, will think I stole them” (Dickens 128). Note the eloquence of this passage, its formal language, and its use of the more complex semicolon, and consider that this is not only spoken by a ten year old child, but by one who has had almost no education to speak of. Oliver’s perfect speech is a manifestation of the moral goodness that lies

at the core of his nature. But the reasoning behind Dickens' decision to provide the young orphan with such mastery of the English language is of greater significance than simply indicating him as morally excellent. As humans, the dialect of a language that we speak is a reflection of how the people around us spoke when growing up, and is influenced by those in our present environment that we speak to. Thus, in subverting this idea and granting Oliver a Standard English dialect, Dickens is conveying the idea that just as environment had no influence on the way in which Oliver speaks, so too does environment play no role in the developing of Oliver's morality.

This theme of the inherent and internal manifesting itself outwardly applies not just to Oliver's speech, but to his physical appearance as well. Buzard observed in his similar analysis that Dickens pays special attention to Oliver's face. He, for example, cites how Fagin claims Oliver's face makes him such a valuable potential thief because the appearances of the other child thieves convict them while Oliver would safely be able to rob old ladies pocket books in chapels (Buzard 1231). Additionally, he notes how Mr. Brownlow is inclined to believe Oliver after the boy tells him his incredible story because there was "truth" in the "lineaments" of his face, and how Nancy sees a good so strong when looking at Oliver's face that the sight of him "turns her against herself" (Buzard 1231). To further add to these observations, Mr. Brownlow begins to doubt that Oliver is the thief who robbed him once he takes a close look at his face. Oliver has a pure, innocent face, the kind of face which, once looked upon, casts doubt on the part of the viewer as to any possibility that he has done anything evil or wrong. The pure, innocent face thus matches the boy's inner nature. This principle also applies to the clothes in which Oliver wears. After being taken home by Mr. Brownlow and nursed back to health, Oliver

is told that Mr. Brownlow wishes to see him. With such short notice, his nurse does not have enough time to fully prepare his outfit. Even so, after examining him, she notes that he looked “delicate and handsome” and that “she really didn’t think it would be possible, on the longest notice, to have made much difference in him for the better” (Dickens 108). Oliver is, in a sense, naturally at home in the suit in which he is given. Finally, he is given clothing that matches who he is internally, thus accentuating his appearance and making him “handsome”. But while Oliver looks nice in the suit, it should be noted that it has not fundamentally changed how Oliver appears. He still has that “delicate” and “innocent” look that he did when he was in rags. His change in environment from the slums to the Brownlow residence has had no effect on Oliver’s already good nature. In this way, Dickens argues that clothes do not make the man, but they may help to bring out parts of the man that are already there.

Equally surprising to Oliver’s mastery of Standard English and his appearance is his demonstrated religiosity. For just as Oliver has never received a proper education to justify his control over English, neither has he had a religious upbringing to justify the level of piety that he displays throughout the whole of the novel. When an unnamed gentleman tells Oliver early in the novel that he hopes that he “[prays] for the people who fed [Oliver] and take care of [Oliver] – like a Christian,” The narrator of the novel responds in a tongue-and-cheek manner that “it would have been *very* like a Christian, and a marvelously good Christian, too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of *him*. But he hadn’t, because nobody had taught him” (Dickens 21). Furthermore during prayer time at the workhouse, Oliver was “kicked” into an apartment, not so that he could pray or so that a member of the church could provide him lessons, but so that he could listen to the other boys beg that the board guide

them into not turning out like he did (Dickens 27). In short, Oliver should know very little to nothing at all about Christianity. True, he may have been acquainted with some of the rituals just by virtue of living in Britain during this time, but no one has bothered to instill within him a passion for the belief system. And yet, the young Twist repeatedly reaches out to God when he witnesses great evil (such as when he realizes Sikes is trying to make him break into the Maylie's home to rob it (Dickens 172)). When Fagin is finally captured at the end of the novel, Oliver follows the Christian virtues of forgiveness, compassion, and mercy, and goes to the prison with the intended purpose of praying with the convicted man (Dickens 422). Finally, the novel ends within a church, with Dickens mentioning his and Rose's "mercy to others, and mutual love and fervent thanks to Him," (meaning God) "who had protected and preserved them (Dickens 428). The reason why Oliver is so pious and follows the core tenants of the Bible so faithfully without being taught is because teaching him was unnecessary; Dickens reveals that God, morality, Oliver's virtues—all of these things were within Oliver all along, instilled within him at his birth. He may not know the formal prayers that the church would teach, but he embodies all of the messages within them all the same.

When looking at the character of Oliver as a whole, the parish boy is flat and static, with little to no development. Simon articulates this most clearly in his assessment that "he comes from middle-class stock and he becomes middle-class stock; his progress in the story is relatively limited, in that the revelation of his background makes sense of and justifies everything we know about Oliver in the present" (Simon 317-318). From this, he concludes that the static nature of the character was intended by Dickens as a means of undermining the Gothic Inheritance story of social mobility that *Oliver Twist* superficially appears to be and that

Victorian audiences had expected (Simon 306-307). Building upon this idea, the novel becomes almost a refutation of the Bildungsroman genre. Rather than create a coming-of-age story in which Oliver changes and develops as a result of the places that he goes, the people who he meets, and the experiences that he has, Dickens crafts a story in which despite the environment's best efforts, the young Orphan remains the same. Thus, in minimizing Oliver's character development, Dickens takes a genre which is known to emphasize a more nurture-based development and turns it into one which instead lends support to an immutable internal nature. The story becomes less of a progression and more of a confirmation of the goodness Oliver embodies.

These tests in order to confirm Oliver's immutable and inherently good nature are sprinkled everywhere within the text, but the primary two are administered by Dickens through Fagin and Edwin Leeford. Starting with the former, Fagin's attempt to corrupt the orphan comes after Oliver is captured and returned to the den by Nancy. The old man proceeds to try to physiologically break the child by locking him in isolation, denying him the ability to "[see anybody] between early morning and midnight" (Dickens 142). He then unlocks the door, allowing a lonely Oliver to see their social interactions and companionship from his room. Next, he has the Artful Dodger and Charley Bates give him companionship, all the while trying to convince him to stay with Fagin. Finally, Fagin placed Oliver in almost constant communication with members of the band of thieves, and treated him as if he himself was a member. In doing all of these things, the narrator reveals that 'the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils; and having prepared his mind, by solitude and gloom, to prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad thoughts in such a dreary place, was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison

which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue forever” (Dickens 148). And yet despite these meticulous efforts on the part of Fagin to “blacken” Oliver’s heart, to change his nature and turn him to a life of crime, the result was an abject failure. Sikes takes the boy with him for his first robbery, but as soon as he “saw that housebreaking and robbery, if not murder, were the objects of the expedition,” Oliver “clasped his hands together and involuntarily uttered a subdued exclamation of horror,” and “a mist came before his eyes, the cold sweat stood upon his ashy face, his limbs failed him, and he sunk upon his knees” (Dickens 172). Note how Oliver does not even need to consider performing this crime; his body has already decided for him. So diametrically opposed to his nature would carrying out this action be, that his limbs fail, his body sweats, and he tears up, all involuntarily. So great is the repulsion that he becomes physically ill and deathly, an occurrence that repeats itself every time he is confronted with evil, be it when he almost dies of sickness when he discovers that the Dodger and Master Bates are pickpockets, right at this moment, or in the near future when Sikes forces him to enter the Maylie house and he almost dies of a gunshot wound. Oliver therefore passes his first major test, confirming the innate goodness within him and denying the influence of environment on moral development.

The latter of these two tests, and the one that lies at the heart of Oliver’s history, is the will created by Oliver’s father, Edwin Leeford. In it, Edwin leaves half of his money to Oliver’s mother and conditionally half to Oliver. In order to receive the money, however, the will states that Oliver “in his minority, should never have stained his name with dishonor, meanness, cowardice, or wrong” (Dickens 408). His reasoning for doing so, however, does not stem from a fear or anxiety that Oliver will turn out this way, but rather from the utmost confidence that

“the child would share [his mother’s] gentle heart and noble nature” (Dickens 408). And despite his horrendous upbringing and despite the best efforts of Fagin and Edward Leeford to corrupt the young boy, Edwin Leeford’s confidence in his son prove completely founded. Through their own observation of Leeford’s will, Hochman and Wachs indicate that “No other Dickens hero so effortlessly gains, not only love, but a providential inheritance that provides him with a name, a preordained identity, and a ready-made world that enfolds him in the warmth and security he has never known” (Hochman and Wachs). This, however, misses the significance of the inheritance. With the exception of a meagre amount of money that becomes even less when Oliver splits it with his half-brother, the will does not grant him anything at all. Oliver’s true inheritance is his morality. In returning to an aforementioned passage at the beginning of the novel, “Nature or Inheritance” had, in fact, “implanted a good, sturdy spirit in Oliver’s breast”. The boy had inherited his mother’s good nature, a hardy spirit that had the resilience to resist any temptation of evil. The will is thus nothing more than an affirmation of what Oliver has proven himself to be from the very first day of his birth. It is the now-justified prediction of a dying man of the supremacy of the nature argument over the nurture argument. On this subject, it should be noted that Oliver’s moral goodness is not the only prediction that Edwin Leeford makes in his will. By staining his own name with dishonor, meanness, cowardice, and wrong through his efforts to corrupt Oliver and hide the truth of his identity, Edward Leeford proved that his father was right in his assessment of his nature (which he would have inherited from his own mother) and that he was justified in denying him the bulk of his fortune.

Aside from *Oliver Twist* himself, it is Fagin who has persevered as one of the most vividly remembered characters in Dickens’ novel, and for good reason. While it is true that other

characters like Bill Sikes have perpetrated more overt violence than the old man has, Dickens is meticulous in presenting Fagin as evil in its purest form. In her own analysis of anti-Semitism within the original work and other adaptations of *Twist* Paganoni cleverly identifies the numerous allusions that Dickens draws to the Devil when describing the man. For instance, he is repeatedly referred to as the “merry old gentleman,” the symbol of the Devil, a snake-like reptile who is “engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night in search of some rich offal for a meal” (Dickens 149), and is explicitly called a Devil repeatedly by both Nancy and Bills Sikes. She further emphasizes that during the scene in which Oliver first meets him, Fagin is sitting beside a fire and holding a pitchfork, and how his modus operandi is typically not to commit crimes himself, but to manipulate and persuade others to do his evil deeds for him, stoking embers within the dark depths of the hearts of those unfortunate enough to be within his sphere (Pagannoni). Theses references to Satan are by no means trivial. Perhaps more than any other figure within the Bible, Satan within Christianity is a symbolic representation of the sin within all men and women. The terror of Satan is not in his ability to sow evil and chaos, but in his ability to find the darkness and Sin that exists in every heart, and to tempt said darkness until it consumes a person. Fagin and Satan are the ultimate corruptors, taking what is already naturally within a person and using it to destroy. Dickens thus plays with this Biblical interpretation of morality—one which would have been widely recognized in Victorian Great Britain—as a way of conveying to the reader how good—and especially evil—are naturally tied to us all.

Dickens, however, does not stop with biblical allusion, but reinforces this commentary on the inborn evil within Fagin by tying his moral depravity to his ethnicity. Paggannoni puts it

best when identifying how his physical features, movements, and personality traits are always described in the clearest detail at the same time in which he is committing an evil action or is being compared to the Devil. Additionally, Fagin's physical description contains virtually every Jewish stereotype which existed during the time of Dickens' writing, be it the crooked back, the hooked nose, or other characteristics (Pagannoni). While Pagannoni highlights these details in order to reveal a vein of anti-Semitism that exists throughout the work and its adaptations, the purposes of this analysis are not focused on unveiling prejudices which Dickens may or may not have had. Rather, her observations are vital in that they demonstrate how Dickens strives to create a biological basis for morality. By consistently describing evil deeds while depicting an individual with all of the stereotypical features of an ethnic Jew, Dickens is subtly guiding the reader to draw associations between the two. Just as the color of one's eyes and the shape of one's face are largely immutable characteristics that are set at birth, so too is Dickens arguing that one's morality is a natural part of an individual which cannot be changed.

On a similar note, it is interesting that despite his use of Jewish stereotypes, Dickens never includes Fagin's religious beliefs in these scenes as a base for morality. Rather than simply neglect to mention it, however, the author goes to great pains to distance the criminal from any sort of religiosity whatsoever. Butterworth shares in this assessment, contributing that Fagin repeatedly breaks Judaism's most fundamental food law by eating ham, a saveloy, and another sausage that may or may not be pork (Butterworth 52). Perhaps even more indicative of how Dickens depicts Fagin as unrepresentative of Judaism is during the final days of the man's life. At this point, Fagin has been captured, found guilty of all of his crimes, and is sentenced to death by hanging. It is in this state, when all hope of escape is lost, when

“venerable men of his persuasion [come] to pray beside him” (Dickens 418). But instead of graciously accepting their company and praying with them to God to forgive his Sins, Fagin has them “driven away with curses” (Dickens 418). When these faithful Jewish men try to pray with him once more, he “beats them off,” and boldly and loudly rave[s] and blaspheme[s]” (Dickens 418). Despite “The Jew” being the most common way of referring to Fagin in the whole novel (a total of two-hundred-fifty-seven times), the infamous character repeatedly disregards and even scoffs at the religious connotations of his descriptor. The question then becomes, why make this distinction? Why does Dickens fully embrace the stereotypes of ethnic Jews while simultaneously distancing Fagin from the religious beliefs of Judaism? Admittedly, it could be yet another effort by Dickens to highlight the moral depravity of the character. After all, to be unobservant of any religion in Victorian Great Britain may have been even more scandalous than following the “wrong” religion (that is, not adhering to Christianity). This, however, seems unlikely, especially when considering the final imprisonment scene. By that point in the story, the reader is fully aware of Fagin’s maliciousness; for Dickens to mention it once again before the character’s death would be redundant. No, Dickens makes this decision once again in order to emphasize the natural permanency of Fagin’s morality. Dickens chooses to make Fagin a Jewish man in part because anti-Semitism is already widespread in Victorian Great Britain and much of the Western World. A large number of his readers would already be familiar with the stereotypical physiological characteristics of ethnic Jews. The actual religion of Judaism is, like all religions, an ideology, a collection of beliefs. A person is free to change ideologies, or convert to a different religious sect or religion entirely. For Dickens to ascribe morality to specific religions or religious beliefs in *Twist* would mean to convey to the reader that morality is, to

some extent mutable based on individual circumstance. The use of the ethnic Jew facilitates his ideas while tying these ideas to ideology muddles and confuses them. Consequently, Dickens highlights the former while being sure to downplay the latter.

While memorized more for his buffoonery than for his villainy, the parochial beadle Mr. Bumble also serves as a vital character in conveying the inherent nature of morality. Similar to the case with *Oliver Twist*, this commentary on morality is demonstrated through the conflict between the beadle's language usage and the environment in which he has been raised. And just as Oliver's perfect use of Standard British English is used as a means to highlight his moral purity in spite of a corrupt environment, Mr. Bumble's linguistic mistakes reflect a compromised moral code. Central here is both his abundant use of malapropisms-- such as him ironically calling foundlings "fondlings" (Dickens 19) and him telling Mrs. Mann that all public figures must suffer "prosecution" instead of the intended "persecution" (Dickens 134)—and his mispronunciation of words altogether. One need look no further for the latter than his calling of jurymen "ineddicated" (Dickens 37) and in his pronouncement that he "inwented" Oliver's name. By all accounts, the beadle's speech and vocabulary should be more refined than it is when one takes into consideration the environment in which he is brought up in and the one in which he is currently a part of due to his position within church leadership. True, he is not nearly as wealthy or prestigious as the Maylie family or Mr. Brownlow, but he does hold more wealth and status in his position as beadle than most of the characters within the novel. To the contrary, however, his speech patterns more closely resemble the Artful Dodger, an impoverished orphan child who has lived most of his life as a participant in London's criminal underbelly. Had Dickens believed that one's morality, as reflected through speech, is truly a

product of one's environment, he would have crafted Bumble's speech to be more representative of his background. On the other hand, in depicting the self-important beadle in the way that he has, Dickens suggests that the environment in which one lives has little to no bearing on his or her moral character.

The clashing of Bumble's morality with the virtues promoted within the environment in which he is a part of is a theme that extends beyond simply his speech patterns. Nowhere is this clearer than during an early scene of the novel in which Mr. Bumble is speaking to Mr. Sowerberry. The undertaker notices the shining button pinned to Bumble and compliments it, to which the beadle beams with pride:

'Yes, I think it rather pretty,' said the beadle, glancing proudly downwards at the large brass buttons that embellished his coat. 'The die is the same as the parochial seal—the Good Samaritan healing the sick and bruised man. The board presented it to me on New Year's morning, Mr. Sowerberry. I put it on, I remember, for the first time, to attend the inquest on that reduced tradesman who died in a doorway at midnight. (Dickens 37)

Almost immediately after gushing about the appearance of the button and how it was given to him for an entire paragraph, however, Mr. Bumble mocks the idea of helping those who are in need. When reminded by Sowerberry that the jury at that very inquest that Mr. Bumble attended ruled that the "reduced tradesman" would still be alive today if the relieving officer had provided him with the aid that he needed, the beadle responds "Tush! Foolery! If the board attended to all the nonsense that ignorant jurymen talk they'd have enough to do" (Dickens 37). Individually, the two comments lend credence to Schlicke's analysis of the beadle serving

as satire of Britain's Poor Laws and the guiding ideology behind them. The beadle's fixation on his own clothing and decoration juxtaposed with his intentional neglect of those in need, mirrors government sense of self-importance while refusing to justify said importance by working to provide aid to the impoverished (Schlicke 153).

Taken as a whole, however, the scene uses the Beadle as a means of further delegitimizing the nurture argument. The "Good Samaritan" is a clear reference to the story told by Jesus within the Bible, in which a Jewish man naked, beaten, and nearing death lies on the ground. While most pass him by, a man from the Samaritan tribe (who were enemies with the Jewish people) stopped to save the Jewish man's life. The story is emblematic of the Christian virtue of treating all people like one's neighbor, to provide help to anyone who needs it regardless of who they are or what they have done. As a man growing up in largely Christian Britain and as one who has been presumably taught and trained by the church hierarchy that he is now a part of, the Beadle has spent the majority of his life immersed in an environment which prizes these ideals. And yet while Mr. Bumble is clearly familiar with the story through his description of it, he completely disregards its lessons when faced with a situation parallel to the story. The button's sole purpose, in his mind, is to improve his overall appearance and to fuel his self-pride. The reader sees this contradiction again from the beadle when he proudly proclaims to Mrs. Corney later in the novel that "The great principle of out-of-door relief is, to give the exactly what they don't want; and then they get tired of coming (Dickens 178). The irony within these scenes helps to emphasize how Mr. Bumble's own morality lies in sharp contrast to the moral lessons of his environment. As such, the influence of the environment in

nurturing his morality is minimized, leaving only nature as a possible explanation as to why he acts and thinks in the way that he does.

Not to be left out, Mr. Bumble's pursuit of Mrs. Corney and the reasons underlying it further run in stark contrast to the religious and moral norms promoted by the church. For when Bumble is alone with the widow in her residence, he is "tempted by time, place, and opportunity, to give utterance to soft nothings, which, however well that may become the lips of the light and the thoughtless, do seem immeasurably beneath the dignity... of a beadle" (Dickens 181). He then proceeds to entrap Mrs. Corney at the table so that she must either hurt herself by moving right and falling into the fireplace, or fall into his arms by moving left (Dickens 181). And finally, Mr. Bumble takes his pursuit one step further when he "deliberately kissed the matron" and "put his arm around [her] waist" (Dickens 182). Once again, Dickens presents the reader with an example in which Bumble blatantly disregards all of the rules of the church that he has grown up with and which he is theoretically supposed to follow as an agent of said church. Instead of devoting his life to the church and to God, as would be expected of his station, he aggressively pursues a woman out of wedlock, and he fittingly approaches and traps her from the left side, a side commonly used as a metaphor for natural evil and wickedness.

This latter point is vital, as Dickens is clear in articulating to the reader that the beadle's actions here are not some sort of thoughtless mistake done in a forgivable weak moment of passion. For after Mr. Bumble is interrupted by an old woman who calls Mr. Corney out of the room, the author humorously describes how the church beadle "opened the closet, counted the teaspoons, weighed the sugar tongs, closely inspected a silver milk-pot to ascertain that it

was of genuine metal... danced with much gravity four distinct times round the table,” and became “mentally engaged in taking an exact inventory of the furniture” (Dickens 183). Mr. Bumble, in his obsession with prestige, appearance, and material wealth, set his mind to abandon all of the rules of the church and to aggressively pursue Mrs. Corney simply as a means of amassing more wealth. Finally, in referring to him as dancing around the room with “much gravity,” Dickens illustrates the beadle as having a corpulent frame at the same time that he reveals this incredible display of greed. In doing so, he ties Bumble’s excessive personality to his excessively large body, almost as if to suggest that these sins of pride, gluttony, and greed that the church went to great pains to denounce are a part of his natural physiology which cannot be changed.

Still, other characters such as Nancy may at first seem to pose as a contradiction to Dickens’ assertion that morality is determined largely by one’s nature. Indeed, of all of the characters within the novel, Nancy undergoes the greatest amount of change. Starting with her introduction in the novel as a prostitute—a character who Victorian readers would view as the epitome of a morally deplorable, corrupted woman—she eventually becomes Oliver’s protector. By the end of the novel, it is she who makes the pivotal decision to betray Fagin and Bill, exposing the plot and saving the young Oliver Twist. She undoubtedly goes through the most change in the novel, and upon first glance is a very complex, developed character. In reality, however, Nancy’s actions and decisions throughout the novel clearly stem from her morally good nature. Vlock notes the profound influence of the theater in nineteenth-century literature, especially that of Dickens, and how this influence can be seen through his extensive use of “theatrical tropes” (Vlock 165). The case of Nancy demonstrates this influence perfectly,

being a prime example of the “tart with a heart”/ “hooker with a heart of good” character trope. As the names suggest, this character archetype depicts a character, usually a woman, who contains a strong moral goodness within them which is in sharp contrast with the sexualized, morally objectionable exterior that most onlookers see. The use of this character trope would have easily been recognized by Dickens’ Victorian audience, thus cuing them in that Nancy is an inherently good person without Dickens having to give many hints on the matter (Vlock 165). Furthermore, the use of a stock character communicates almost a sense of permanency to the reader. No matter what happens within the setting of the story, the character is more or less bound to adhering to its own stereotype. It is, in a sense, a fictitious character with a set nature. In this way, Nancy being a stock character, tied with the specific type of stock character that she is helps to further promote a nature-based morality.

Nancy’s inherently good nature is confirmed through her interactions with Oliver Twist when she kidnaps him and returns him to Fagin’s den of thieves. Desperate to return to Mr. Brownlow so that the kind man does not come to believe that he stole his books, clothes, and money, Oliver makes a run for the door. Rather than try to stop the boy or consider what his escape would mean for her and her allies, Nancy lunges at Sikes and shouts out in a panic “Keep back the dog, Bill...keep back the dog; he’ll tear the boy to pieces... the child shan’t be torn down by that dog, unless you kill me first” (Dickens 128). Her argument with Fagin is even fiercer; for as soon as the old man “inflicts a smart blow on Oliver’s shoulder with a club,” she “flings it into the fire with a force that brought some of the whirling coals into the room,” she “[stamps] her foot violently on the floor,” she “[bites] her lip until the blood [comes],” and, “her face colorless from the passion of rage into which she gradually worked herself,” she screams

out to the thieves present “Let him be- let him be, or I shall put that mark on some of you that will bring me to the gallows before my time” (Dickens 129-130). Nancy’s strong stance on behalf of Oliver is, at first glance, perplexing. After all, with the exception of briefly meeting him during the introduction of her character in chapter nine, this moment and the time it took to bring him to Fagin’s den are the first times in which she has ever interacted with the orphan. One would think that she would have more loyalty to Fagin and Sikes than some boy she plucked off of the streets. Elucidating this confusion, the narrator chronicling Oliver’s story attributes her outbursts to the “manners and customs of that particular species of humanity to which Nancy belonged,” including “strong passions” and “fierce impulses of recklessness” (Dickens 129). In short, Nancy acts in this way because she is a woman. Common Victorian conceptions of women were that they were, by their own nature, impulsive, emotional, and guided by their most basic passions. This, in conjunction with the Victorian idea that women were natural caretakers, helps to depict Nancy in a sort of passionate motherly defense of Oliver. It does not matter that Nancy has lived her whole life as an orphan in London’s criminal underbelly. It does not matter that Fagin, the man whose name is synonymous with evil, raised her for twelve years from the age of five to be a thief (Dickens 130). It does not even matter that Nancy has absolutely zero experience as a mother or in raising a child. As soon as Oliver is placed in danger, the maternal nature at the core of her being overrides these past experiences, and she instinctually protects the orphan as if he were her own son or younger sibling. Dickens thus demonstrates nature to be at the core of Nancy’s guiding moral code.

Similar to this idea of promoting nature-based morality through Nancy’s instinctual motherly instincts, Dickens also conveys this same message through the establishing of pseudo-

familial bonds between her and Oliver. During the scene in which Oliver is being captured, Nancy convinces onlookers to disregard his pleas for help by claiming that Oliver is her “dear brother” who ran away from home (Dickens 119). At the time it is uttered, the comment is easy to dismiss as nothing more than a trick to capture Oliver with as little resistance as possible. The claim gains much more credence by the next chapter, during which the aforementioned scene occurs where Nancy begins assuming the role of motherly or sisterly protector. While Nancy is certainly not Oliver’s sister, there is one character from the novel that comes surprisingly close: Rose Maylie. Rose is revealed to be Oliver’s aunt, but is never presented as such. Instead, when the relationship is brought up, she is the sister of Oliver’s mother, and Oliver is “her dead sister’s child (Dickens 426).

To make matters even more interesting, these very two women who are suggested as being sisters to Oliver are also foils to one another. Like Oliver, both are orphans who have limited to no memories of their parents. Furthermore, both end up taking the side of good in siding with Oliver and Mr. Brownlow, and both serve the role of protector to Oliver when he is sick, wounded, or being persecuted by the criminal world. In fact, the only primary two differences between them are where they were raised (the slums or within the middle class) and their fates at the end of the novel. The clear connection of the two becomes even more prevalent when considering the similar titles that these two characters have had during the novel. In his analysis of the two characters, Garnett brings attention to the fact that in the early chapters introducing Nancy, Dickens most common epithet for her was “the lady,” and how “lady” is the most common way Nancy addresses Rose when she finally meets her in the later chapters of the novel (Garnett 506). And finally, during their famous first meeting, the two

meet at a “family hotel” in Hyde Park, thus even further reinforcing this close relationship between each other and with Oliver (Dickens 311). The line between these two characters blurs, and Nancy and Rose become one and the same: a woman related to young Oliver by blood and whose connection is tightly bound like that of a brother-sister relationship. In tying this triade of characters together, Dickens continues in his style of associating morality with a sort of biological inheritance. Nancy and Rose are ‘moral sisters’ to Oliver in that they all have a strong goodness instilled within them, and the familial ties discovered between Nancy/Rose and Oliver as the novel nears its conclusion provides an answer as to why these characters can be so morally similar despite their widely different experiences in life.

Much later in the novel, Dickens further confirms her inherent goodness through her conversation with Rose Maylie. During the conversation, Nancy once again reminds the reader of the environment she was nurtured in, stating that she “has never from the first moment [she] can recollect [her] eyes and senses opening on London streets have known any better life” (Dickens 315). In such a terrible, malnourished place, one would expect Nancy to turn out similarly. And indeed, Nancy tries to convince herself and Rose that this is the case. Garnett notes the great deal of reverence that she gives to Rose in this whole passage, highlighting the extensive use of religious language throughout. For example, Nancy describes herself in terms such as “shame,” “sin,” and “wickedness,” and refers to Rose as “angelic”. In doing so, he argues that two opposite forces of “Saved” and “Damned,” the soul represented by Rose and the mortal flesh represented by Nancy, are drawn together (Garnett 505). Furthermore, Nancy goes as far as to explicitly state her belief in her environment’s influence on her moral decay when she explains that if she had “heard [Rose’s blessed words], they might have turned [her]

from a life of sin and sorrow; but it is too late—it is too late” (Dickens 317). In actuality, the reader can plainly see that the very fact that Nancy is here speaking all of this to Rose proves these notions to be untrue. At the risk of her own life, she sneaks away from the Bill Sikes and travels across wide swaths of London just to tell Rose about the truth of Oliver’s identity and the great danger that he is in. Once reaching the hotel where she talks to Rose, she willingly suffers insults and humiliations from the four “respectable ladies” in the establishment in order to make sure her message reaches Lady Maylie. And finally, when Rose tries to reward her with the offer of money and an escape from the den of thieves, she declines, saying that she wants “Not a penny” (Dickens 319). She is, despite her history, a morally good person by nature. The fact that her upbringing under the tutelage of Fagin is a source of enormous shame for her only goes further to cement this idea. Oliver and Rose did not, as Nancy famously put it “turn [her] against [herself]”. She could count the number of times that she met the two on a single hand. No, it is Nancy—her inner nature—which turned against the influence of a criminal life and upbringing, and which ultimately prevailed.

Her good nature having won out in this battle, however, does not provide Nancy with the means to a happy ending. To contrary, it is this very victory which makes her eventual tragedy all but a certainty. She is, after all, the ‘hooker with a heart of gold’ archetype; despite the undeniable moral goodness within, she is ensnared within the exterior world of vice and evil that she was raised in. And in this case, the one who ensnares her is Bill Sikes and her loyalty to him, regardless of her repulsion to the evil that he does. Unwilling and unable to allow her environment to corrupt her good nature, but also unable to leave Sikes, Nancy reaches a conclusion that ends up leading to her death: She returns to Sikes and tries to change

his nature so that they can leave London's criminal underbelly together. Tatum argues that once confronted with this idea, the patriarchal Sikes falls into a murderous rage out of fear that he is losing control over her, and thus an integral part of his identity:

He first decided to kill her because her loyalty to Oliver caused her to betray him. She usurped his power over her and acted of her own accord. Her offer for them to live separate and more respectable lives infuriates Sikes even more, because he sees her pleas as a further threat to leave him, which would remove the object on which his identity is based and thus destroy him. (Tatum 252)

While apt in her assessment of the patriarchal nature and violent possessiveness underlying Bill as a character, the violent way in which he murders Nancy goes beyond just a deeply rooted fear of losing control over her as an object the lies at the foundation of his identity. Rather, his violence equally stems from her futile efforts to try to change Sikes' nature, something that Dickens has conveyed time and time again to be immutable. She tries to argue that by simply retreating to the country and getting away from the crime of London, she can change Bill into being a respectable man, a man who can learn to become just as good Oliver or Rose Maylie. In this scene Sikes sees her loyalty to Oliver and is enraged when he is left with no choice but to acknowledge that her nature is diametrically opposed to his. His rage becomes murder as a statement that rehabilitation is not possible for him; he simply is who he is. For her part, Nancy can no longer continue living in an environment so antithetical to her nature, nor is she able to change Sikes' nature and leave; consequently, she is left with no option but to die "in the same hell in which [she] lived" (Dickens 319).

Simultaneously, Badinjki argues the necessity of the death scene in order to maintain the parallels that exist between the “fallen woman” Nancy and Oliver’s mother, who experienced a similar “fall” by giving birth to Oliver out of wedlock. She expresses that “The account of Agnes’s death and love for the infant Oliver is also intended to excite our sympathy for her,” and that “She runs away from home to save her father and little Rose from disgrace, and like Nancy, ‘can do nothing but die’” (Badinjki 211). Similarly, Nancy runs back to London’s slums despite Rose’s urgings for her to reconsider, convinced of her own disgrace and determined that it is too late for her. The decision once again leads the reader to further associate her inherent moral goodness with a possible connection to the Fleming family, a connection that is immortalized during her last minute of life when “raising herself, with difficulty, on her knees, [she] drew from her bosom a white handkerchief—Rose Maylie’s own—and holding it up in her folded hands, as high towards heaven as her feeble strength would allow, breathed one prayer of mercy to her Maker” (Dickens 374). Thus the white handkerchief, symbolizing the pure goodness of Rose Maylie, is pulled both literally and figuratively from her heart, from within herself, proving to the reader beyond doubt that her own unchanging natural goodness was there the whole time.

The nineteenth century marked a renewed interest in the millennia-long quest in determining where one’s morals come from. With the works of John Locke and Rene Descartes published just over one hundred years ago, and Charles’ Darwin’s landmark *Origin of Species* on the cusp of its publication. Not immune to the fervor of the debate was Charles Dickens, who used his much-acclaimed novel *Oliver Twist* as a platform to communicate the idea that rather than a product of experience, morality is derived from within. He does so not just through the

character Oliver, but through Nancy, Fagin, and Mr. Bumble as well. Perhaps more than anything else, the debate over the source of one's morality is an ambitious effort to better understand oneself and to understand others. The simple effort of reflecting, of looking deeply within oneself and of pondering why one holds the beliefs and principles that they do—it is *that* which is perhaps of the greatest value of all, even more so than the answer to the age-old question itself.

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